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MICHIGAN HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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THOMAS W. PALMER

By M. AGNES BURTON

ADVANCE PAGES, PROCEEDINGS OF THE MICHIGAN PIONEER AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



LANSING, MICHIGAN
WYNKOOP HALLENBECK CRAWFORD CO., STATE PRINTERS
1914



J. M. Palmer

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THOMAS W. PALMER

BY M. AGNES BURTON

Thomas Witherell Palmer, or as he was more familiarly known, "Tom Palmer," the only son of Thomas Palmer and Mary A. Witherell, was born in Detroit, Michigan, January 25, 1830, in a brick building on the southeast corner of Jefferson avenue and Griswold street. His ancestors, both paternal and maternal, were among the first New Englanders to seek a home in the west.

Thomas Palmer, the father of Thomas W. Palmer, was born at Ashford, Conn., February 4, 1789. When eighteen years of age, in company with an older brother, Friend, he became an itinerant merchant, a common vocation in New England at that time. They set out with a stock of general merchandise and a span of horses, traveling through Western Canada until they reached Malden. Here they established themselves and carried on a successful business until the War of 1812, when they were made prisoners. After being held five weeks and being unwilling to take the oath of allegiance to Great Britain, they were transported over the river to Monguagon. They proceeded to Detroit and were very soon again made prisoners. This time they were released on parole and

Read by Mr. C. M. Burton at the Midwinter Meeting, Port Huron, February 5, 1914.

returned to Connecticut. Again they set out with merchandise and making their headquarters at Canandaigua, New York, Thomas departed for Canada and Detroit, arriving at the latter place on June 16, 1815.

From this date Thomas Palmer made Detroit his permanent residence and became the western representative of the firm F. and T. Palmer. In 1820 he built the brick building on the southeast corner of Jefferson avenue and Griswold street, with a store on the first floor and his home above. The firm flourished until 1824 when the partnership was dissolved and from that time on Thomas was interested in various projects of importance.

In 1823 he contracted in conjunction with David C. McKinstry and DeGarmo Jones to build the court house for the City of Detroit. This building was to be completed December 1, 1824 and in payment for the work the contractors received lands in the Ten Thousand Acre Tract and one hundred forty-four city lots. The larger share of this property subsequently came into the possession of the Palmer family through purchase. He had a share in one of the wharfs on the river; took contracts for grading and hauling; owned valuable lands in St. Clair county, where he laid out the village of Palmer (later called St. Clair) and operated a saw mill thereon; had a lumber yard at the foot of Bates street, Detroit; owned interests in several of the steamboats on the river at various times, and in 1845 speculated in Lake Superior mining

lands. He was intimately connected with the building of the First Baptist Church, contributing money and lumber for its construction and was a stockholder in the Association for Promoting Female Education in Detroit. In 1819 he was one of the trustees of the town and he served as alderman at large several times. He was a jolly, kind-hearted man, weighing about 250 pounds and was the butt of many a good-natured joke. In later years he was in partnership with his son, Thomas W. Palmer. He died August 3, 1868 after several years of painful illness.

Mary Amy Witherell, the mother of Thomas W. Palmer, was the third daughter of Judge James Witherell and Amy Hawkins, and was born in Fair Haven, Vermont, October 4, 1795. Her father had, in 1809, been appointed one of the judges of the Supreme court of the Territory of Michigan. Mrs. Witherell and her children joined him in 1810, but the hostilities of the savages and lack of comforts induced her to take her children and return to Vermont for a visit in 1811.

At Hull's surrender, Judge Witherell, his oldest son, James C. C., and a son-in-law, Joseph Watson, were taken prisoners and sent to Kingston, Canada. They were soon paroled and joined their families in Vermont. After the war Judge Witherell returned to Detroit where he continued in office for twenty years, when he became Secretary of the Territory. He died January 9, 1838.

Judge Witherell's daughter, Mary Amy, married Thomas Palmer August 20, 1821. They traveled east on their wedding trip and returning on the Walk-in-

the-Water were wrecked near Buffalo, November 6, 1821.

Thomas James Palmer, who in 1850 changed his name to Thomas Witherell Palmer, was the third of the four children of Thomas Palmer and Mary Amy Witherell Palmer, who grew to maturity. His oldest sister, Mary Amy, named from her mother, was born in Detroit, in 1826 and died November 29, 1854. On June 22, 1848, she married Henry M. Roby, of the firm of Hunt and Roby, who was a loved and life long friend of Thomas W.'s and whose daughter Mary Roby Hamilton was to have been heiress to the Palmer wealth and estates, had not death cut short her career in April 1890. His second sister Julia, married on November 2, 1853, Henry W. Hubbard, who died in New York, April 28, 1871. Later, Mrs. Hubbard married Hugh Moffat, January 27, 1879. She died November 20, 1880. Sara, the youngest sister, died unmarried November 22, 1859.

When Thomas W. was three months old, the house in which he was born burned to the ground. His family sought a temporary residence in a building near by but soon removed to a house on Woodward avenue. This was a "rough cast house" nearly opposite Cliff's tavern where John R. street joins Woodward avenue. It was two and a half stories high, quite commodious and had a garden extending up to the Grand Circus Park. The Palmers remained here until some time in 1834 when they removed to their comfortable residence just completed on the corner of Fort and Shelby streets. Here they lived

nearly seventeen years and in 1851 moved to a handsome new home on Jefferson avenue.

Tom's first school days were spent in Detroit where his good-nature and mischievousness quickly attracted many friends. One of his early teachers was Ebenezer Hurd Rogers, named after Ebenezer Hurd, an uncle of Tom's—the husband of his Aunt Betsy Witherell. In November 1842, when he was twelve years old he was sent to an excellent private school for boys and girls, conducted by the Rev. O. C. Thompson in the village of Palmer (St. Clair). Here he soon showed a precociousness which placed him far in advance of many of the older children.

Under Mr. Thompson, he prepared for the University of Michigan, studying Latin, Greek, Algebra and the ordinary English branches. His essays written during the three years at the Academy show unusual originality of style and composition. Here he made many new friends, among them being David Jerome, who later defeated him in the nomination for governor of Michigan.

Mr. Palmer used to tell amusing stories of his school days at Palmer. Once when Mr. Thompson wanted to have an exhibition of the work done in his school he called upon Tom to write a Latin salutatory. He says, "I didn't know what a salutatory was, but I looked it up in the dictionary and found that it was a 'welcome.' I didn't know any more about a Latin salutatory than a broncho, but I knew that few of those to be in attendance were any wiser, with the exception of Mr. Thompson, so I took down my Latin

dictionary and produced a salutatory which if it had been read in the days of Augustus, would have been the hit of the year and would have convulsed four or five Colosseums with laughter. But it went off in good style, sounded very learned; everybody was satisfied and Mr. Thompson gratified."

Another amusing incident of his boyhood, one which shows an early budding of his business instinct, is told in connection with the excitement aroused over the Polk-Clay election. Tom's father was an ardent Clay man. Tom Sheldon, one of his playmates, was the son of a staunch Polk man. The boys bet a shilling on the election, but as the day approached Tom Palmer began to hedge, and having no shilling to pay his debt he bet with Jim Simpson against Clay. After election Sheldon came to collect his debt and Tom referred him to Jim who when he learned of the game, vowed he would never pay Sheldon. For years it was a standing joke between Sheldon who annually dunned Palmer and Palmer who annually refused to pay his election bet.

Tom's schooldays at Palmer soon passed and in the fall of 1845 he was admitted into the State University at Ann Arbor. Here he continued his former studies, always keeping in sight his early ambition to study law and by that means to enter the field of politics. He was very popular with his professors and the Ann Arbor people with whom he became acquainted and with his college chums. In 1847 he joined the Chi Psi fraternity.

Owing to ill health from which he had suffered all

through his college course and to continual trouble with his eyes, he was forced to give up his studying early in 1848 and for a time to abandon his desire to become a lawyer. He returned to Detroit and soon with five of his college chums decided to travel, paying his way by Daguerrean art. He also made arrangements to consult an eye specialist while in New York.

On October 24, 1848, David James, Cleveland Whiting, Stephen Tillotson, James Witherell, George Kellogg and Tom Palmer boarded the "Potomac" bound for Brazil by way of Cadiz. Tillotson furnished most of the capital and the boys went in debt for the balance. Palmer's letter to his mother just before sailing was full of enthusiasm at the prospect of the trip and hope that his eyes would recover in the long rest so that he could study law upon his return.

The voyage across the ocean was rough and tedious and on December 1, 1848, six weary boys set their feet upon *terra firma* for the first time in thirty-four days. They landed at Cadiz on a bright warm day, and in after years Palmer often described the joy they felt upon that December day in 1848. After a three weeks walking tour in Spain and Christmas at Cadiz, they set sail December 30, for Rio Janeiro, which Palmer described as the "dirtiest place on earth."

He then returned to New Orleans, landing there May 1, 1849. His independent spirit prompted him to stop there long enough to work off his debt, but his longing for home and the knowledge that he would be promptly invited to return, that his debts would be paid and a parental blessing bestowed as soon as his

family knew of his return to his home country, made him weaken. He wrote home with the expected result and reached Detroit early in the summer.

The condition of his eyes still prevented close application or reading, and he again abandoned his desire to study law. In May 1850, he set out on board the steamer "Michigan," and landing at Green Bay, Wisconsin, very soon established himself with Whitney and Company, forwarding and commission merchants. During his connection with this company he was stationed at Kaukalin, Green Bay and Appleton. Here he saw plenty of opportunities to "turn a penny" and did not fail to take advantage of them. Here he also had his first political experience. In the fall of 1850, he was elected, without seeking the honor, delegate to the Whig County convention to be held October 22. He was chosen secretary of the convention and after transcribing the proceedings of the meeting, was appointed delegate to the Senatorial Convention to be held at Manitowoc. That honor he declined, because he could not conscientiously neglect his business. Here he celebrated his 21st birthday January 25, 1851, and on that occasion wrote a letter home to his brother-in-law Henry Roby, asking for advice as to his future career. This letter reveals a wisdom that is surprising in a young man of that age. It shows him still clinging to his early ambition to study law as a means to an end, but as being rather inclined to build a career upon a mercantile basis and to study law as a side issue.

Immediately following this letter he set himself up

as a merchant, stocking himself with general goods and speculating in flour and grains. He succeeded very well, but was burned out January 19, 1852, and was able to recover but a small part of the damage covered by insurance. He made a plucky attempt to start again, but in the effort to recover his insurance he saw a better opening, which resulted in his establishing himself in partnership with his father in the insurance business in Detroit.

In Detroit, in 1853-4, they had an office under the Farmer's and Mechanic's Bank, and their business card read, "Insurance, Land and Tax Agency, Thomas Palmer and Son." They were agents for the Monarch Fire and Life Assurance Company, Irving Fire Insurance Company and Mohawk Valley Fire Insurance Company. They also agreed to attend to the purchase and conveyancing of farms and wild land and city property and the payment of taxes, in Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois. They investigated titles and purchased patent titles to bounty lands in Illinois. Mr. Palmer immediately took his old place in the society of the city and was called by the young men of his acquaintance "quite a blood."

In July 1855, his first effort in a literary line was printed in the Detroit Tribune under the signature "Jose." On October 16, 1855, he married Lizzie Pitts Merrill, daughter of Charles Merrill, a wealthy lumber man who owned and operated large pine interests in Michigan and ran a large mill at East Saginaw. He continued in business with his father until 1860 when he became bookkeeper for the firm of Charles Merrill

and Company. In 1863 he went into partnership with Mr. Merrill and remained with the firm until Mr. Merrill's death in 1872, after which he took into the company as partner, J. A. Whittier of Saginaw. Under the name of C. Merrill and Company, they managed the business for over thirty years, selling out only in 1903.

In the summer of 1856 Palmer made several stump speeches for Fremont and Dayton, and in August while visiting in Portland, Maine, made an address before a republican meeting, upon which the papers commented favorably. In 1860 he came near being nominated alderman of the first ward, but lost to N. P. Jacobs.

In 1864, owing to Mrs. Palmer's ill health, they took up their residence on the corner of Woodward avenue and Farnsworth street, which at that time was looked upon as a suburban home. Here his attention was divided between his business and the management of a miniature farm. Upon the death of his father in 1868, he assumed the care and responsibility of all of his mother's estate—the lands on Jefferson avenue and a farm out Woodward avenue where the present "Palmer Park" is located. On December 28, 1872 Mr. Merrill died, leaving his daughter and Mr. Palmer his heirs.

The year 1873 was the real beginning of Palmer's political career, which extended over less than twenty years. That year he was elected one of the estimators at large on the first Board of Estimates of the City. The most important question which came before them

was the buying of a city park. In 1876 Mr. Palmer was a candidate for member of Congress for the First District, but was beaten by Henry M. Duffield. In 1878 he declined to run again, but upon the earnest solicitation of his friends he accepted the nomination for state senator, tendered him by acclamation, and won the election.

While in the state senate he introduced a bill to establish an institution for delinquent girls, which was passed. He presented a petition of many citizens of Detroit for the passage of a law enabling the city to issue bonds to the sum of \$700,000 for the purchase of Belle Isle for a city park and to build a bridge over the American channel of the Detroit River. This bill was acted upon and May 27, 1879, the legislature authorized the city, with the consent of the estimators, to issue bonds and purchase the island. On September 25 of that year the purchase was consummated. Mr. Palmer's interest in the improvements of his city is seen in his support of a petition of Detroit citizens for a boulevard around the city, which resulted in a provision of the legislature May 21, 1879, for a Board of Boulevard Commissioners. A petition signed by women and men of Detroit for an amendment to the State Constitution to the end that women might vote for the election of school officers was presented by Thomas W. Palmer. He was also interested in petitions for prohibition, and during this short period of two years he became the champion of several causes which he continued to support throughout the rest of his life.

In 1879 he was chairman of the republican com-

mittee, and made several campaign speeches. He ran for nomination for governor of the state, but was defeated by his old school friend of St. Clair Academy, David Jerome. This defeat was thought to have been a great disappointment to Mr. Palmer, but his speech when Jerome was nominated showed that he was a good loser and generous even in defeat.

"One by one the martyrs pass before you, but we come not as martyrs, but as apostles of the great Republican party. It was said that when the French army was retreating from Moscow in the march, while the soldiers exhausted by hunger, frozen by the cold, were dropping by the wayside, they would rise as Napoleon passed by and cry out 'Long live the Emperor' then fall back in the snow as their winding sheets. What was it the French soldier cheered as Napoleon passed by? Was it the man who crossed the bridge at Lodi? * * * * They cheered because they saw in that cocked hat and gray surtout, visions of the vine-covered cottage on the banks of the Seine or the Loire, the gray-haired father, the yearning eyes of the mother, the little brothers and sisters and all the delights of home.

"So do we, who have been frozen out today by the votes of your delegates rise up and cry out as the great Republican party passes by 'Long live the Republican Party.' * * * *

"Thanking you gentlemen of the convention and particularly my friends within your ranks who have been so generous in their support of me, I congratulate you upon the result you have achieved. In nomi-

nating Mr. Jerome you have done the very best you could under the circumstances, possibly with one exception. I predict an overwhelming majority for our candidate in November."

On Decoration day, 1879, he made an eloquent address on the Campus Martius near the Soldiers' Monument. This was only the beginning of many eloquent addresses by Michigan's most popular orator.

In 1882 his name began to appear for United States Senator to succeed Ferry, but not until he saw that Ferry was losing did he allow his name to be used. He won the election and took his seat as Senator December 3, 1883. While in the Senate he made one of the first speeches ever made in that body in favor of woman suffrage. He strongly favored government regulation of railroads, and originated the phrase "Equal rights to all, special privileges to none." He was one of the few who dared to take a stand against trusts, and in his speeches he sounded warnings against the dangers of permitting big corporations to gain so much power. He introduced a bill in favor of regulations to restrict immigration and prepared an exhaustive and comprehensive report for its support. He was chairman of the committee on agriculture, had charge of a bill creating the department of agriculture, and had much to do with its passage. As a presiding officer he had an enviable reputation for dignity and neatness of dispatch.

He was a gifted orator and a still better debater. His address in Washington at the memorial exercises for Gen. John A. Logan is generally regarded as his

most finished oratorical effort. On June 29, 1887, he addressed the graduating class in the University of Michigan, and because of his attitude toward the liquor question he was severely criticised by papers when his name was again mentioned for political office in 1888. His words, "It is better that the strong should want alcohol than that the weak should be overcome by it" were quoted and commented upon, but Mr. Palmer put a quietus on the criticisms by announcing that he was not a candidate for second term. At this time there was a rumor that he was to be made Secretary of Agriculture in Harrison's Cabinet, but in spite of Palmer's enthusiasm over agriculture and his work in establishing that department, he did not receive the portfolio.

In 1889, unsolicited, Harrison offered Palmer the Embassy to Spain. A grand farewell dinner was given in his honor and he sailed in April, accompanied by his wife, his niece and heir, Mary Roby Hamilton, her husband Capt. Hamilton, U. S. A., Mr. William Livingstone, Jr., and General Friend Palmer, his cousin.

Even while in Spain he was not allowed to rest. His friends were ever urging him to run for governor, and it is very probable that it was his intention to again enter the gubernatorial arena when he cut short his stay in Spain, departing in the early Spring of 1890. On the way to America he received news that his niece Mary Roby Hamilton had died. This, together with the death of his brother-in-law Henry M. Roby before his

arrival in the city, so deeply affected Palmer that he emphatically declined to consider the possibility of becoming a candidate for Governor of Michigan.

In June 1890 Harrison appointed Palmer one of the Commissioners for the World's Fair to be held at Chicago in 1893 and the board elected him President. The excellent results of his work in this connection speak volumes for his wonderful executive ability and his tact in handling people. This ended Palmer's political career, although there were frequent attempts to draw him again into the whirl, in 1895 and 1899.

After the Fair he suffered from a nervous collapse which necessitated a long rest. This was spent with Mrs. Palmer on Long Island Sound where they later built a beautiful home known as Larchmont Manor. In the fall of 1895 their Woodward avenue residence was destroyed by fire. Fortunately many of the valuable pictures, rugs and curios had been moved to Larchmont and were preserved. In 1897 the Senator built a handsome brick residence on the Log Cabin Farm, where he spent his declining years until his death June 1, 1913. There, surrounded by his books, he welcomed his friends, annually entertained the "Old Boy's Club," and celebrated several of his birthdays. He read, wrote, learned to ride a bicycle and indulged in his favorite hobby of farming and breeding fancy stock.

As no child had ever entered the Palmer home, the Senator lavished his affection upon an adopted daughter, Grace Palmer Rice and a Spanish boy, Harold Palmer, to whom Mr. and Mrs. Palmer had become

deeply attached during his official life to Spain, and who became his heir.

His business activities throughout his life, although varied, had been almost uniformly successful and he had amassed a large fortune before he entered the political arena. He always gave freely, both privately and publicly; hospitals, charitable institutions, G. A. R., Y. M. C. A. and the University of Michigan were recipients of his generosity.

A lover of art, he was one of the founders of the Art Museum of Detroit, gave \$15,000 to start it and was its first President. In 1848 he was one of the original members of the "Vingt Club," a society similar to the Audubon Society, and in 1877 he was one of the founders of the Detroit Humane Society.

During the Civil War he was one of the most enthusiastic promoters of the Michigan Soldiers' Monument Association. Upon its organization, in July 1861, he was chosen secretary, and served through 1885. The site chosen for the monument was in east Grand Circus Park, and the cornerstone was laid July 4, 1867. After much consultation and in accordance with the recommendations of Randolph Rogers, the artist, it was decided to locate the monument on the Campus Martius. The cornerstone was removed and on April 9, 1872, the monument was formally dedicated.

Mr. Palmer was a member of many Patriotic Societies, of several city clubs, the Equal Suffrage Club of Michigan and the National American Woman's Suffrage Association. He was a member of Zion

Lodge No. 1 and an honorary member of the Light Guards.

Although a Unitarian and a liberal contributor to all its demands, he gave freely to the support of other religious institutions. The Mary W. Palmer M. E. Memorial Church he erected as a loving tribute to his mother, and in his will he left a generous sum toward the support of superannuated Methodist Episcopal preachers.

In acknowledgment of several gifts to, and a life-long interest in, Albion College, President Dickie conferred upon Palmer as a Christmas gift in 1904, the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

He was always the first to be called upon if any guest of honor was to be entertained. He was a popular toast master and chairman, and no committee for civic or patriotic entertainment was complete without him. He was constantly called to preside at some public function and always acquitted himself with brilliancy and wit. An amusing story related in illustration of his resourcefulness is as follows: In 1887 upon the occasion of a visit of a number of Mexican government officials, Palmer gave an eloquent address of welcome in Spanish. After the speech, the Mexicans crowded about Palmer, praising his Spanish and the warm welcome, and asking a thousand questions, delighted with the thought that there was at least one person who could understand their native tongue. After a moment of confused embarrassment, Palmer shook himself free of the ardent Mexicans and feigning deafness, beat a hasty retreat.

However he was never so happy as when at his Log Cabin farm at the five mile road out Woodward avenue farming and playing the role of "mein Host." This farm he inherited from his mother, and by additions and improvements he had made of it a beautiful spot. Here in 1887, he gratified a whim of Mrs. Palmer's to live in a real log cabin. Furnished throughout with handsome old mahogany that had been in the Palmer, Witherell and Merrill families and equipped with every modern appliance, the log cabin made a comfortable suburban residence. At "Font Hill" as it was first called, later "Log Cabin Farm" Mr. and Mrs. Palmer spent much of their time, away from the noise and confusion of the city which had gradually encroached upon their Woodward avenue home.

In 1895 Mr. Palmer presented the city with one hundred and forty acres of his beloved farm to be used as a pleasure park for the people of the City of Detroit, with only one stipulation, that none of the virgin forest should be wantonly destroyed. "Log Cabin Park," or "Palmer Park" as it is also called, is one of the most beautiful parks in the city, second only to Belle Isle. It is visited daily by thousands and is a beautiful and fitting monument to one of Detroit's most loyal and useful citizens.

A sketch of this great man would not be complete without a few words concerning the faithful partner of his long and useful life, who is now making her home at Larchmont Manor. Mrs. Palmer, Lizzie Pitts Merrill, was the daughter of Charles Merrill and

Frances Pitts. She was always a frail, delicate woman, but so far as her health would permit she took a keen and active interest in all of Mr. Palmer's affairs. She traveled with him, was with him while in Spain and was one of the most charming and popular hostesses during Mr. Palmer's Washington career.

Mrs. Palmer was interested in the Humane Society, and on July 15, 1901, gave the city the "Merrill Humane Fountain" in memory of her father. She also shared in the gift of "Log Cabin Park" and the famous Log Cabin. Although wealthy in her own right, she was the principal beneficiary and residuary legatee in the will of her husband.

Mr. Palmer's final act of generosity is shown in the terms of his will, in which he has provided for a host of relatives, apparently remembering everyone in proportion to their wants, with donations of money or provisions for their support by annuities. All of the remainder of his estate after these bequests were made, he left to his wife.

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